

# The Christian News-Letter

Edited by  
J. H. OLDHAM

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DEAR MEMBER,

The recent News-Letter about relief and reconstruction in Europe after the war has brought the following comment from a German pastor, who is a refugee in this country. His powers of observation and reflection are evident from the letter. When so shrewd an observer after some years of residence among us says in effect, "People in Great Britain understand two of the elements that have made the Germany of to-day, but are in danger of overlooking a third factor, which is perhaps the most important of all," it is worth our while to sit up and take notice:—

"In your recent News-Letter (C.N.-L. No. 169) you deal with the tasks of reconstruction in Europe. The outstanding one among those you mention seems to me to be the fourth, dealing with the restoration of order. I think that more needs to be said on this subject, particularly in regard to the sociological conditions that will have to be dealt with. I should like to emphasize this, since I believe that nothing will be so strange to those who attempt to restore European order as the sociological conditions existing on the continent of Europe. May I explain?

"In Great Britain with its liberal tradition the Government even in war time imposes its rules and ordinances largely by persuasion combined with compulsion in the background. It is generally assumed in this country that, in contrast to this, the totalitarian states rely solely on compulsion. That, however, is not the case. In these also there is a combination of propaganda and compulsion. But the combination is something quite unfamiliar to the Anglo-Saxon mind. In Germany the majority of the people do not feel that they are being compelled to obey the will of the Government. Why? The reason is that the life of society and the way of thinking have been completely changed. In most instances the individual feels himself in agreement with the Government. This is partly the result of propaganda, but much more fundamentally the result of a corporate social life. The individual has a sense of being protected and sustained by something larger and stronger than himself. He is conscious of a comradeship which he had previously lacked. He has the feeling of being incorporated into a secure and successful society. He feels himself in a new, and admittedly entirely earthly, sense to be at home, in contrast with the atomistic conditions of a post-capitalistic society.

"I do not, of course, know how much of this feeling may have by now evaporated and how much still remains, but that certainly was the situation of the National-Socialist society a few years ago. In saying this, I am neither justifying nor condemning this state of things, but only describing it. If you reflect that it is on a social soil of this kind, constituted by a corporate life, that the seeds of propaganda are cast, and that in the background for those who are hesitant or recalcitrant lies the overwhelming force of the totalitarian state, you will realize how it is that the Nazis are also able to speak about freedom. This state of things has been brought about the more easily in Germany because, in comparison with other countries, the older social and political traditions have struck less deep root and have suffered many interruptions during the past three centuries.

"The point which I wish to make is that people in this country are alive to two of the elements in the Nazi totalitarian state, i.e. the inhuman terror and the anti-Christian ideology, but much less to the third element, which is important for the ordinary man and the daily life of the masses—the fact of the corporate daily life. It is in this that the strange attractive power of the Nazi system lies. It is the fundamental explanation of the power which the Nazis have acquired over the German masses.



"Now about the post-war task. Just as little as the Nazis are capable of organizing the life of the French will the western nations be able to organize the life of post-Nazi Germany, unless they learn how difficult it is to deal with those who have passed through a far-reaching experience of a secular corporate life. It is important for us as Christians to understand that the whole terrible experiment of Nazism is something that the German people have experienced on behalf of all the nations involved in the post-capitalistic age. I say this, not in defence of Nazism, but, on the contrary, to make clear what will be involved in dealing with post-Nazi Germany. Nothing will be of less value to them, or will exert less influence on them, than any form of ideological propaganda, apart from the infinitesimal fraction of educated people who still remain susceptible to such influences. This country is still capable of being swayed by ideologies, and is not, like Germany, completely tired out by them. Only a social order that is fully capable of organizing and incorporating the individual into the institutions of man's earthly social life can succeed on the Continent. I believe that this applies not to Germany alone, but to the whole of Europe, including Russia, which will go its own way, but not a very different way from that of which I am speaking.

"It must be remembered that even in Great Britain the masses, while not actively opposed to ideologies, are for the most part completely sceptical of them and cannot be won for them by any mere process of reasoning. Why is this? Because *all* ideologies have come more and more to resemble one another. People in this country are hardly awake as yet to the fact that humanist, Marxist and Fascist reasoning have been increasingly brought to the same level, and that the differences are tending to disappear, so that in the end a vague and universal mood of European decadence is in danger of superseding all the older traditions, with the exception of Christianity. You can no longer build up a Communist, Fascist or democratic 'party' in Europe. You cannot get anyone whole-heartedly to believe in it. The whole of Europe will be completely *post-Nazi* without *real* classes or *real* parties or *real* 'world views' or even *real* nationality. There will be only a vague internationalism, favoured by many of the democratic rescuers (whose ideas are not vital or realistic enough for the time), but likely to prove a serious obstacle for the architects of the future of Europe.

"To what does all this lead? The conclusion surely is that Christianity can become the vehicle of new life only if it dissociates itself from all dead ideologies, including a good deal of current Christian-social thinking, and if the heart and brain of the Church, which have been weakened through centuries, recover their vigour, and if through the power of this life it is able to create for the plain man a true corporate life. What we need is power—the power of the Spirit, the power of the Word, power over life, power over life and death, but always power."

## DEMOCRACY AND BELIEF IN GOD

Dr. Eduard Heimann, formerly Professor in Hamburg University and now Professor of Economics in the new School of Social Research in New York, has sent me a letter which he contributed recently to the American weekly journal *The Nation*. He points out that Lincoln's phrase about government of the people by the people, for the people, is constantly quoted apart from its context, and therefore misquoted. In the Gettysburg address, the passage is qualified by the hope "that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom." The words "under God" are an integral part of Lincoln's thought; he did not believe such government as he spoke of to be an absolute guarantee of freedom, nor that the "people" are immune from greed, nationalism, vindictiveness and other similar evils.

If peace and order are to be established in society, Dr. Heimann continues, there are two alternatives between which man has to choose. He may submit to the power of other men or he may submit to objective standards which he reveres as emanating from God. There must either be restraint by other men or restraint by the consciousness of a binding, although unverifiable, commandment; logic leaves no third possibility.

"It would be futile to deny that a genuine ethic can exist as an autonomous code, independent of the religion from which it was derived. But it can so exist only in individuals and for but a few generations. Such an ethic persists for a time because, though its representatives have forsworn religion, religion is still vigorous in them and keeps their eyes bright and their souls clean. It is as if the roots of a tree were drying up, but the sap continued, for a while,



to circulate in the trunk and twigs. It would be an error to infer that the tree could live if its roots had no sustenance, and religion is the sustenance of moral life. . . .

"Religion does not make democracy safe; it only makes it possible. Religion does not make man good; he always remains liable to error and temptation, even though he knows the divine commandment. But the important thing which makes him man is that he does know the divine commandment, although he may violate it. . . .

"Christianity is not a religion for good men, but for sinners. It gives them the hope that repentance will help them rise above the injustices they have committed and give them a new start, 'a new birth.' Christianity is the doctrine of renascence through repentance. If democracy is really shocked out of its moral laziness, it may become ripe for, and capable of, the repentance which will bring it, under God, a new birth of freedom."

The question here raised is familiar enough, but Dr. Heimann is right in insisting that everything hinges on it. Are men themselves the sole masters of their fate, or, as Dr. Heimann says, is the thing that makes them men that they know the divine commandment, even though they may violate it? In the answer to this question the future not only of Christianity but of democracy is at stake.

It is true, and it is bound to have a far-reaching effect on men's minds, that in the war the most shining example of resilience, tenacity, resource, solidarity and sacrifice for the common good has been given by a nation which has publicly, with an explicitness and on a scale never before known in history, repudiated belief in God. There is no Christian interest to be served by depreciating in any way the astonishing achievements of our Russian allies. Let us take the facts as they are. Sir John Maynard<sup>1</sup> finds the clue to the dynamic changes that have come about in Russia in the fact that its people have been seized by a new idea—the idea that man can make his own history. There seems to be no doubt that this idea has power—the French Revolution is another example—to move men with an almost religious fervour, to act as a liberating force, and to release abounding energies.

It is the great weakness of Christianity to-day that the answer of Christians to such facts is for the most part too easy and glib. But even when we have exposed, and intend to go on exposing, our minds to their full pressure and challenge, the major question which Dr. Heimann raises still confronts us. Without detracting one iota from the Russian achievement or committing the folly of prophesying its failure, we have still to say that the verdict of history has not yet been given. The success of man's attempt, which began with the Renaissance, to take sole charge of his own destiny is far from being demonstrated. Great outbursts of energy have been followed in history by periods of decline. Never were higher hopes of the future entertained than at the time of the French Revolution; a century and a half later we have the France of 1940.

Again, it is a crucial and as yet unanswered question whether atheism is a possible foundation of a democratic and free society. Men's conduct is determined in the long run by their ultimate beliefs. If there is no purpose in the universe except the purposes of men, what is there to restrain individuals and groups who have the power from imposing on others their own ideas of what is right and good? If, on the other hand, men believe in a wisdom and goodness infinitely greater than their own, of which each individual, or group, or party, or epoch apprehends but a tiny fragment, they will be less disposed to push their views to an extreme and more ready to recognize that those who differ from them may possess part of the truth. It has yet to be proved that the spirit of toleration, which is essential to democracy, can grow from any but a religious root.

A further question of the highest practical importance, which it has long been the fashion to brush impatiently aside, is whether men can make anything of their world unless they know themselves—know, that is to say, their imperfection. Where this knowledge is lacking, they are apt to be betrayed into disastrous blunders through overconfidence in their own powers. If they know their real condition, amendment is possible;

<sup>1</sup> In his recent book, *The Russian Peasant, and Other Studies*, Gollancz, 15s.



they may, as Dr. Heimann says, through repentance, experience a new birth. The world may yet discover that the secret of human progress lies in the saying of Jesus that there is joy in heaven over one sinner that repents, more than over ninety and nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

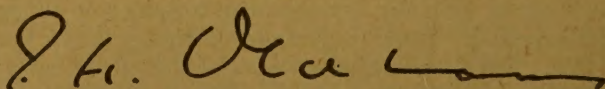
These are real and live issues, and the Christian view of them can claim to be more realistic than its rivals. But the Christian claim is not felt to be challenging. Perhaps we try to bring God in too soon. We talk of Him in terms of an experience that has not come to living grips with the forces that give its character to the modern world—with humanism, science, the problems of a mass society, and a social order that has become so perverted that to talk of applying Christian principles to it seems at some points sheer futility. Consequently what we say appears to be unreal and cuts no ice. If men are to listen to us we must have been where they are.<sup>1</sup> Only in the arena of real life can it be proved that Christian faith gives a truer interpretation of the realities of man's earthly life, and has power to inspire men with a stronger hope and a greater energy and perseverance, than a faith which is centred in man alone.

### A BOOK FOR LENT

Those who desire to undertake special reading during Lent may be glad to have their attention called to the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book, *The Doctrine of our Redemption*, by Principal Micklem of Mansfield College.<sup>2</sup> It is precisely what Dr. Micklem sets forth in this book that multitudes to-day find so hard to understand and so remote from their actual experience of life. But if Christians need to expose their minds to the realities of life as it is experienced by many ordinary men and women, they need also to strengthen their hold on the realities of the faith by which Christian men and women in past generations have lived. Dr. Micklem's volume, which draws on the stores of Christian thought and experience through the centuries, can challenge and help us in this latter task.

We have had many letters asking how contributions can be made to the relief of the suffering in Europe. Donations can be sent to the Famine Relief Committee, 67 Brook Street, London, W. 1.

Yours sincerely,



<sup>1</sup> This demand is pressed home in a challenging article in the February issue of *The Presbyterian* (James Clarke & Co., 5 Wardrobe Place, London, E.C. 4, 4d. post free, annual subscription 4s.), to which we extend a hearty welcome in its new and enlarged form. The writer is Alexander Miller, who has also just published a little book, *Biblical Politics* (S.C.M. Press, 2s. 6d.).

<sup>2</sup> Eyre & Spottiswoode, 3s.

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